LENKE NÉMETH

TRANSCENDING GENERIC BORDERS: WILLIAM FAULKNER'S *THERE WAS A QUEEN*

> Time present and time past
> Are both perhaps present in time future,
> And time future contained in time past.
> If all time is eternally present
> All time is unredeemable.
> (T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*)

Enamored and enchanted with English romantic poetry at the beginning of his literary career, William Faulkner aspired to become a poet, yet his literary journey navigated him to genres other than poetry. After winning world fame and recognition with his daring and dauntingly enigmatic prose works by the 1950s, at the zenith of his career he labeled himself a "failed poet" claiming: "I think that every novelist is a failed poet. I think he tries to write poetry first, then he finds he can't. Then he tries the short story, which is the most demanding form after poetry. And failing at that, only then does he take up novel-writing" (qtd. in Meriwether 217). Indeed, Faulkner's efforts to start out as a poet were abortive, yet all throughout his career he remained a poet and a romantic at heart.[1] His poetic vein apparent in his unusual feel for words as well as in his instinct for color and rhythm is perhaps best captured in his short stories, a genre that

[1] See John Birk's study on Keats' influence on Faulkner's oeuvre, while the romantic dimension in Faulkner's works is discussed by Robert Woods Sayre. Both references are in the Works Cited section.

Faulkner considered "the hardest art form" next to poetry (qtd. in Blotner 345). Admittedly, in his search for the most demanding literary form Faulkner created narrative techniques, innovative in the extreme, that tend to transgress and dissolve generic categories by integrating techniques encountered in arts other than fiction (music, film, painting).

Faulkner's short story "There Was a Queen" (1933), selected for study in the present paper, serves as an excellent example of transcending generic borders by a skillful fusion of the formal elements of poetry, fiction, and music. Lyrical in its tone, diction, and imagery, musical in its construction, this story blends poetic language with an intricate pattern of musical structuring combining a polyphonic arrangement of narrating voices and the theme-and-variation musical form in its overall design. The reading I am proposing here aims to show that the convoluted technique of narration employed by Faulkner in the story is brilliantly adapted to rendering his main thematic concern, the decline of a Southern aristocratic family. Nevertheless, a close study of the working of the musical structural design will show that neither is the vanishing of past glory presented with nostalgia, nor is the new South depicted with sympathy. It is expected, though, that the investigation will throw into relief Faulkner's profound artistic vision that human morality is of central importance in human action. I would also argue that the approach focusing on parallels between literary and musical structures is a legitimate enterprise, though this kind of literary analysis has frequently generated conflicting responses in literary criticism.[2]

There seems to be consensus that Faulkner's vast repertoire of narrative techniques was cross-pollinated by musical forms such as symphony and polyphony, yet the interface between the variation theme and his short story structure has not been explored. His

[2] René Wellek and Austin Warren, for instance, are disinclined to give validity to such an approach on the grounds that "literary devices of recurrence, contrast, and the like [...] are common to all the arts" (127). By contrast, T. S. Eliot argues that "the use of recurrent themes is as natural to poetry as to music," thus "there are possibilities for verse which bear some analogy to the development of a theme by different groups of instruments, there are possibilities of transitions in a poem comparable to the different movements of a symphony or a quartet, there are possibilities of contrapuntal arrangement of subject-matter" (38).

compositional technique, particularly in his novels, readily evokes symphonic construction, which in literature is "a repetition-with-variation type of compensatory device [...] based on a movement away from and back to the principal key as well as on the exposition—development—recapitulation (re-exposition) pattern, in which there is a continual return to the main theme" (Virágos 176). Admittedly, the multiple narration technique, a widely used modernist narrative procedure—also improved and refined by Faulkner—has its origins in the musical texture of *polyphony* that ensures equal emphasis to contesting voices and parts in a musical piece. Parallel to the gradual withdrawal of the omniscient narrator in fictional experiments, particularly from the end of the nineteenth century, this musical device proved to be a suitable means of authorial manipulation to foreground characters with their own points of view. As Faulkner rejects a single authorial point of view, "most of his stories are told largely through the consciousness of participant characters" (Beck 739), that is, he employs the polyphonic character arrangement in his fictional works. Interestingly enough, a precise description of this character portrayal technique is provided by M. M. Bakhtin, who identifies the polyphonic structural design in Dostoevsky's novels. Accordingly, Bakthin's observations concerning Dostoevsky's narrative techniques appropriately elucidate Faulkner's pluralized narration method:

> A character's word about himself and his world is just as fully weighted as the author's word usually is; it is not subordinated to the character's objectified image as merely one of his characteristics, nor does it serve as a mouthpiece for the author's voice. It possesses extraordinary independence in the structure of the work; it sounds, as it were, alongside the author's word and in a special way combines with the full and equally valid voices of other characters. (7)

"There Was a Queen" also exhibits the working of a beautifully orchestrated polyphony of voices narrating the same story—constantly expanding—from the perspectives of three women inhabiting the now unmanned Sartoris house. In addition, a third-person narrator's somewhat detached voice also appears throughout the story, yet it cannot be considered the mouthpiece of the authorial point of view, or, for that matter, of a fourth perspective. Warren Beck's claim

concerning the presence of Faulkner's voice is also valid here: "even if Faulkner himself speaks, through third-person narrative, he usually keys his utterance to the mood of the scene and makes himself the lyrical mouthpiece of his characters' experiences" (739).

First published in *Scribner's Magazine* in January, 1933, "There Was a Queen" belongs to a cluster of short fiction written by Faulkner in his most productive period between 1926 through 1933, when his canonical masterpieces appeared: *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), *As I Lay Dying* (1930), *Light in August* (1932), and *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936). In the selected work Faulkner extends the story of the Sartoris family introduced in *Flags in the Dust* (1929, published as *Sartoris*) and addresses the issue who qualifies as a Sartoris woman. He embeds one of his recurrent themes of stasis vs. change in a conflict arising between first John Sartoris's sister, Old Mrs. Virginia DuPre (Miss Jenny) and Narcissa Benbow Sartoris, the widow of Mrs. DuPre's great-great-nephew. Narcissa's sexually unscrupulous act, using her sexuality to "buy back" the obscene love letters addressed to her a long time ago, threatens and undermines Sartoris pride and honor. The third woman character included is Elnora, a mulatto servant, who was singled out by "Cunnel" to take care of Virginia DuPre. Far from playing a minor role, Elnora finds it her mission to uphold and defend the Sartoris code.

The theme-and-variation[3] form, which adequately describes the compositional structure of the selected story, follows the pattern of introducing a theme which is developed and altered during repetition with changes. By analogy, in Faulkner's story a *single* scene placed in the center of the narration matches the musical theme (which is certainly not identical with a covertly expressed literary theme): it is the *creek episode* when Narcissa and her son, Bory walk across the pasture toward the creek and come back with their clothes on. This episode serves as a catalyst in several ways. It sets the story in motion

[3] A widely used formal technique through most of the history of classical music, the theme-and- variation form was much favored by several twentieth-century composers such as Arnold Shoenberg, Anton Webern, Paul Hindemith, and Benjamin Britten. In his *Variation and Fugue on a Theme by Purcell*, for instance Britten introduces various instruments to pick up the theme and elaborate on it, each making full use of its own potentials in tone and technique

as it triggers the static characters' physical movements as well as their mental journeys into the past. Spotting Narcissa with her son makes Elnora leave her cabin an hour before the time of her usual routine, while the motionless and erect Miss Jenny sitting in her wheelchair next to the window suddenly leans forward to see Narcissa and her son crossing the garden. Ultimately, this event hastens Miss Jenny's death. When she learns that sitting in the creek is a purification ritual for Narcissa after she has "defended" the Sartoris honor by sleeping with a federal agent in Memphis to retrieve the love letters that were thought to have disappeared, Miss Jenny asks for her "small black bonnet of ancient shape" she would wear when she was upset and dies leaving behind "a faint single gleam of white hair" (228).

Like a musical theme, the creek motif is both developed and altered with continuous variations that move from simple to more elaborate ones, thus following the basic principle of the progress from a simple to a more intricate design that provides an overall shape to a variation set. The musical theme is reiterated and modified by a succession of invariants, also identified as potential constants, and variants that may be harmonic, melodic, contrapuntal, and/or rhythmic, which constitute the variation theme. The invariants contribute to the unity of the work, while the variables shape some other factors such as density, range and register in music. Analogously, recurring in its altered and modified versions in the three women characters' accounts, the creek scene is gradually expanded in a non-linear mode into larger temporal and spatial dimensions, which allows for revealing the Sartoris family's distressing past. Thus the structural design proves to be a suitable means to create nostalgia for and stir memories of the irrevocable and irretrievable past of the Sartoris house. Recurring elements, like the *flower garden*, which Miss Jenny keeps watching, the *scent* emanating from it, and the *Carolina window* function as invariants, while Miss Jenny's and Elnora's memories and reminiscences gradually unfolding qualify as various types of variants. In my reading of the text the *harmonic* and *melodic* variants reiterate and modify the theme by embellishing it with emotionally neutral information, while the *contrapuntal* and *rhythmic* variants always uncover some painful and upsetting detail about the past. Thus a complex network of interrelating variants illuminates and extends the creek episode.

Tracing the convoluted route of the *garden* invariant as modified and expanded will illuminate the actual working of the compositional design. Arguably, the *garden* features as a constant reminder of Miss Jenny's as well as the Sartoris family's tormenting past. First mentioned in a purely factual manner by the narrator in the opening scene, the *garden* is established as a spatial referential point for Virginia DuPre, "who was ninety years old and who lived in a wheel chair beside the window above the flower garden" (Faulkner 211). Next this invariant is reiterated by a *harmonic* variant as the image of the garden is enriched with sweet smells and pleasing sounds, dimensions effecting upon sensory organs: "[Elnora] went up the quiet, high-ceiled hall filled with scent from the garden and with the drowsing and myriad sounds of the June afternoon, to open the library door" (213).

The *scent*, the *seeds*, the *jasmine*, and the *window* constitute closely related invariants metonymically referring to the *garden*, and they are perpetually developed and altered in conjunction with each other, thus enhancing the density and complexity of the texture. These items gain symbolic meanings throughout the story and serve as points of departure in the present from where past events are unfolded in a non-linear fashion. This structural principle effectively underlies Faulkner's time concept whereby the past projects itself into the present and the present reaches back to meet the past. Conversely, the variation set compositional design proves to be an appropriate means to show Faulkner's treatment of past as proposed by Zsolt Virágos:

> the past, or rather the sum total of all the pasts, is a kind of lump in the present, which must not be chronologically unraveled, for then we would have a succession of relative pasts and presents. Faulknerian past therefore is extra-temporal. It is something here and now, present in the proper sense of the word. (346)

If past is invariably present, all time is held together echoing Eliot's words: "If all time is eternally present/All time is unredeemable."

A *harmonic* variant of the window motif describes Miss Jenny's position next to the window and links her with the past both literally and figuratively: "Beside the window (the sash was raised now, with its narrow border of colored Carolina glass which in the winter framed her head and bust like a hung portrait) an old woman sat in a

wheelchair" (213). Her immobility prevents her from going down into the garden and the window hermetically separates her from the outside world by framing her as if she were "frozen" into a portrait hung on the wall. Modified in a *contrapuntal* variant by Elnora, the window turns out to be "a kind of lump in the present" as it evokes Miss Jenny's home in Carolina and her escape from there: "Getting here in the dead winter without nothing in this world of god's but a basket with some flower seeds and two bottles of wine and then colored window panes old Marse John put in the library window so She could look through it like it was Cal-lina" (216). Curiously enough, the first version of the title, "Through the Window"[4] also underscores the significance of the window by highlighting, though, the *object*, the garden, that is, what is seen through the window. By contrast, the second version, "An Empress Passed," as well as the final title, "There Was a Queen," shift the emphasis on the *subject*, on the person watching through the window, therefore on the passing away of a distinguished person who embodies the dignity and the pride, all the mores of a bygone era, an irrevocable past.

Elnora's emotionally charged reminiscences pertaining to the *garden*, the *window*, and the creek episode are beyond doubt subsumed in the categories of *contrapuntal* and *rhythmic* variants. Her rapidly flowing speech replaces the slow pace of the descriptive language of the story, whereby the inner dynamics is maintained by the alternation of passages of greater intensity with passages of less intensity. The change in tempi largely contributes to the musicality of a text since the transitions between these passages "give a rhythm of fluctuating emotion essential to the musical structure of the whole" (Eliot 32).

Driven by her loyalty to Miss Jenny and her outright hostility towards Narcissa, she provides antecedents to the creek scene and reveals the most painful memories about Miss Jenny's escape from the Yankees in '69. Elnora's watching "the woman and the boy go down across the pasture in the hot June sunlight" gives rise to a *contrapuntal* variant of the creek motif and is linked to Narcissa leaving for Memphis for two days for no apparent reasons as well as her sudden

[4] The versions of the title as well as the publication history of the short story are provided by Hans Skei's study. See Works Cited for the reference.

arrival home: “Well, it’s her business where she is going, [. . .] same as it her business how come she went off to Memphis, leaving Miss Jenny setting yonder in her chair without nobody but niggers to look after her” (212). Further on the *contrapuntal variants* provided by Elnora disclose that Narcissa is both scheming and manipulative. For instance, Elnora is not surprised about Narcissa’s return from Memphis since “she ain’t going to leave this place, now she got in here” (212). Elnora finds suspicious “Miss Narcissa’s doing a mighty lot of traipsing around all of a sudden,” especially “for a woman as lazy as her” (213), which implies Narcissa is dishonest and deceitful. Her outright contempt of Narcissa, however, is expressed in her judgment that she is “Trash. Town trash” (31). Convinced about Narcissa’s deviousness Elnora even contradicts Miss Jenny by claiming that “she [Narcissa] won’t never be a Sartoris woman” (214).

The *rhythmic* variants concerning Miss Jenny’s fleeing from Carolina and her arrival in Mississippi mirror Elnora’s agitated state of mind when recalling those harrowing events to her son Isom: “Come all the way here by Herself, and the country still full of Yankees. All the way from Cal-lina, with her folks all killed and dead except old Marse John” (216). Further escalating the horror of the escape in a steady crescendo, Elnora expands the previous *rhythmic* invariant by adding: “With the Yankees done killed Her Paw and Her husband and burned the Cal-lina house, over Her and Her mammy’s head, and she come all the way to Mississippi by Herself, to the only kin She had left” (216). In light of the past sufferings and torments Miss Jenny went through, Elnora finds Narcissa’s cunning behavior particularly outrageous and indignantly bursts out: “she thinks she can pick up and frolic” (217). She also clearly sees how the “town trash” could cheat Miss Jenny the “quality” as she [Narcissa] worked for five years to get herself married to Bayard: “Coming out here two or three times a week, with Miss Jenny thinking she was just coming out to visit like quality. But I knowed. But knowed what she was up to all the time” (217–18), as she explains to her son Isom.

The *garden* acquires an even greater significance when Miss Jenny’s perspective is presented. Building an emphatic crescendo with various types of variants and a thrice refrain-like repetition of Miss Jenny looking down into the garden (218), Faulkner does not merely emphasize the importance of the place for her but also foreshadows

disclosing some ancient, perhaps hidden secrets about the family. Indeed, the garden is inevitably linked to her own past and the disturbing memories of being forced to leave her home in '69. However, Miss Jenny's *melodic* variant of the escape with her intently looking at the "now stout shrubs which she had fetched from Carolina as shots not much bigger than matches" (218) juxtaposes Elnora's *contrapuntal* variants pertaining to the same event. At the same time the former accentuates Miss Jenny's attempt to hush down those painful memories. A *harmonic* variant of the garden reminds Miss Jenny of Narcissa: "it was in the garden that she and the young woman who was to marry her nephew and bear a son, had become acquainted" (218–19). Yet, a *contrapuntal* variant reveals her resentment over Narcissa's insignificant character: "I wonder how she ever got herself engaged to Bayard, talking so little. Maybe she did it by just being, filling some space" (219).

The invariants, the *garden*, the *scent*, the *jasmine* are all effectively drawn together in the climactic moment when Narcissa faces Miss Jenny after the creek episode. Before the young woman can utter a word, Miss Jenny peremptorily demands that Narcissa smell the jasmine emanating from the garden. A reminder of Miss Jenny's past, "a kind of lump in the present," the jasmine is endowed with sacred properties as if warning Narcissa to take an oath on it and tell the truth: "Wait, "the old woman said. "Before you begin. The Jasmine. Do you smell it?" (222) Expanding the jasmine motif in a carefully structured *contrapuntal* variant that not only accentuates the eternal cyclicality of the jasmine growing but also relates it to her family's past memories Miss Jenny establishes frames of reference for Narcissa: "Always this time of day it begins. It has begun about this time of day in June for fifty-seven years this summer. I brought them from Carolina, in a basket. I remember how that first March I sat up all night, burning newspapers about the roots. Do you smell it?" (222) The repetition of the question "Do you smell it?" hammers it through that Narcissa should conform to the rules and traditions of this family.

Narcissa's perspective then unveils the mystery about the creek episode. It turns out that she meant to defend the respectability of the Sartorises in a rather ambivalent way. When learning about the existence of the obscene love letters that were stolen on the night of her wedding to young Bayard, she decides to get them back from the

Federal agent who possesses them as he was investigating the robbery. Narcissa decided to regain them by selling her body to the Federal agent in Memphis. Justifying her travel to Memphis she says: "I had that much regard for Bory and you, to go somewhere else" (225). Back home she felt the urge to bathe with her clothes on in the creek. Devastated by the Narcissa's corruptness as well as her conviction that she acted as a Sartoris woman, Miss Jenny refuses to speak to Narcissa and not long after Narcissa's departure she dies in her wheelchair.

Despite Miss Jenny's apparent control of the conversation between herself and Narcissa, she is destined the fate of the other members of the family as the narrator's description of the two women prior their meeting suggests. Motionless, quiet, with silver head that is fading, Miss Jenny represents stasis, while Narcissa, "a large woman in her thirties" embodies strength and power and there is even "something about her of that heroic statuary": "She [Miss Jenny] sat erect in the wheel chair, motionless, watching the young woman cross the room, her white dress flowing slowly, heroic, like a caryatid from a temple façade come to life" (222). Interestingly enough, *caryatid*, used as a qualifying adjective to depict the likeness in the posture that Miss Jenny and Elnora adopt when they are both eager to see Narcissa through the window is now attributed to Narcissa, yet considerably modified in its reference. The two women's caryatid-like character is transmitted to Narcissa and the caryatid symbolically transforms into a living being full of vitality. This image reinforces that she embodies change, motion, and activity, which are all in sharp contrast with stasis, motionlessness, inertia, and inactivity the other two women represent. Furthermore, turning into an "enlivened caryatid" may entitle her to take over Miss Jenny's place and become a Sartoris woman.

Narcissa's prospective Sartoris woman status is dubious and it would be rash to conclude that Miss Jenny's death would inescapably entail Narcissa's assuming the role and position of a Sartoris woman. Since Faulkner "saw in his stories innumerable ramifications of meaning, [...] and that all subjects are infinite" (Virágos 337), he further weaves the intricate web of the story by endowing Elnora with a multiplicity of roles. The compositional structure as well as the roles ascribed to her grants her prominent place and status. First, framing

the story with Elnora indicates her de-marginalization: her silent movements and repressed thoughts narrated by an indifferent narrator fill the opening scene, while her summoning Narcissa to the dead body of Miss Jenny finishes the story. Second, as stated and argued earlier, fuelled by her resentment and anger over Narcissa's leaving Miss Jenny for two days, Elnora extends the context of the creek scene with *contrapuntal* and *rhythmic* variations thus revealing details about Narcissa's character and Miss Jenny's past. Third, the "coffee-colored" Elnora enacts the stereotypical role of the faithful black servant. In this capacity, her role can also be properly qualified as the black mammy, a stereotypical character frequently appearing in Faulkner's works. I find that a list of qualities attributed to a black mammy as presented below summarizes Elnora's traits as well:

> She was considered self-respecting, independent, loyal, forward, gentle, captious, affectionate, true, strong, just, warm-hearted, compassionate-hearted, fearless, popular, brave, good, pious, quick-witted, capable, thrifty, proud, regal, courageous, superior, skillful, queenly, dignified, neat, […] faithful, patient, tyrannical, sensible, discreet, efficient, careful, harsh, devoted, truthful, neither apish nor servile. (qtd. in Kent 55)

Most importantly, however, Elnora is cast in the role of a careful observer, a character type I will refer to as "the compassionate troubled observer" borrowing Beck's term. In his typology of Faulknerian characters Beck argues that "Quentin Compson in *The Sound and the Fury* and in *Absalom, Absalom!*, a whole chorus of country folk one by one in *As I Lay Dying*, Benbow in *Sanctuary*, Hightower in *Light in August*, the reporter in Pylon, and Ratliff in *The Hamlet*" belong to this group of characters. As he points out the principal function of these observers is to "provide the reflective point of view from which the story is told and thereby determine its moral atmosphere" (741). Linguistic as well as compositional evidence testifies that Elnora also qualifies as a "compassionate troubled observer." This role seems to have been instilled into her: "she was half black, and she watched" rather than "wonder as a white woman would have wondered" (212). Feeling it her mission to take care of Miss Jenny, as instructed by "Cunnel" "because it's a Sartoris job, she dedicates her life to watching Narcissa's acts in order to defend Miss Jenny from an outsider. Indeed, the verb "watch" frequently occurs in

the descriptions characterizing Elnora: she "watches the white woman," "watched the carriage roll away," "watching the carriage disappear" (212). As pointed out earlier Elnora's *contrapuntal* and *rhythmic* variants expanding the context of the creek episode all mirror her succinctly articulated opinion about Narcissa "Trash" and while "Miss Jenny Quality" (215).

Giving such prominence to Elnora with a combination of procedures undercuts the story's apparent romantic nostalgia to the past since she herself is the product of an unjust social system where sexual transgressions were accepted for whites. Elnora is Old Bayard's half-sister, "though possibly but not probably neither of them knew it, including Bayard's father" (210). Ironically, in her ardent defence of "Miss Jenny quality" (215) and her antagonism toward Narcissa, she perpetuates a bygone era with its hypocrisy, pretension, and mendacity. In light of this Narcissa's immoral behavior may be read as a continuation of the pattern set by the previous generations. By the same token their sins may have caused the extinction of the male members of the Sartoris clan.

The pervasive presence of the past in the present is achieved by the effectively applied theme-and-variation design as discussed above, and also by an intricate patterning of the story on phonological, grammatical, lexical, and syntactic levels, all closely related to each other. While the compositional design contributes to gradually widening the temporal and spatial scope of the story, Faulkner, "the prose poet" (Virágos 343) uses poetic devices that determine the tone and the musicality of the story. The first two paragraphs of the story establish the somnolent, drowsy atmosphere rendering a sense of stasis, which otherwise dominates the whole story.

Detached as the narrator attempts to sound, he cannot escape rendering an overwhelming sadness and melancholy that pervades the house and its present inhabitants. The dominance of the past is immediately set by the overabundant use of past perfect and past tenses. The repetition of *had died* in connection with four generations of the Sartoris family strengthens a sense of fading into the past. Even the present state of affairs is rendered via past tense: "the quiet was now the quiet of the women folks" (210). Even the present event—Narcissa and Bory going to the creek—is projected into the past by Elnora telling and viewing it from the past: "she had come to the door

and watched them—the boy and the big young woman in white going through the hot afternoon, down across the pasture toward the creek" (211).

Just like the subtle, sweet fragrance of the jasmine that penetrates Miss Jenny's room, a dull, drowsy, and lethargic mood pervades the one-hundred-year old Sartoris house. This mood is achieved by overabundant use of the word *quiet* all throughout the story, which enhances the all-pervasive stillness as well as motionlessness in the Sartoris home. In musical terms the word "quiet" functions as a basso continuo, insistently present and coloring the tone ("that expression of grave and quiet contempt," "in her cold, quiet voice," "the quiet, high-ceiled hall"). The repetition of this word, however, contributes to the musicality of the story, since following T. S. Eliot's argumentation, "the music of a word is, so to speak, at a point of intersection: it arises from its relation to the words immediately preceding and following it, and indefinitely to the rest of its context" (32).

Establishing analogies between formal elements of theme-and-variation and Faulkner's "There was a Queen" has contributed to identifying correspondences between literature and music, which "enhance and refine the auditory perception of literature" (Egri 7) and has allowed for revealing a multiplicity of interpretative levels in the story. Last but not least, casting Elnora the major role of the "compassionate observer" who determines the moral atmosphere of the story underlies Faulkner's credo that morality is of utmost importance in human acts.

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